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## **Standing Watch: Protective Vigilance Against School Shootings**

Echoes of the name Sandy Hook have rippled across the nation, on the lips of parents and politicians, and within our schools, on the lips of teachers and principals. With the name reverberates plans to avoid the same breed of tragedy in each school, using preventative and combative measures against any school shooter. One of these measures, which has drawn possibly the most controversy, is training and arming teachers. Yet, this is the most basic defense against a shooter: the ability to shoot back. Obviously, responsible steps must be taken to ensure that unstable teachers and children do not have access to the firearm, and that it is not their only option of defense. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to protect his or her students and, in the case of a school shooter, it is the most basic, direct, and effective way of thwarting the threat.

To show it is the most basic, direct, and effective response, though, each other method must be considered, and then eventually compared to it. Therefore, first, let us consider what the threat is that we are preparing for, and compare and contrast that with the sparking incident to these reforms: Sandy Hook. We will do this by going step-by-step through what happened at Sandy Hook, alongside whatever response or lack thereof there may be in regard to each point. Then, we shall consider those methods which are in response, not to this particular shooting, but to the trend of school shootings in general.

The shooter shot through the locked door and entered the building (CNN, 2013). This is the very first point: entrance. The only responses of specific preventative measures on the entrance are metal detectors, and securing the entrance via visual identification from the office before being buzzed in. Neither of these prevents what happened at Sandy Hook. He had no desire to hide the fact that he was carrying, and the door being locked did

nothing to stop him.

The only thing that might have slowed his entrance is bullet-proof glass, such as banks have, sometimes, to protect their tellers. For a school, it would make more sense at the entrance, since it is access to the school that is to be prevented, instead of behind the counter of a bank. However, even bulletproof glass has its limits. According to CNN, the weapon he used to shoot out the door was an AR-15 (CNN, 2013). An AR-15 can get through Level 7 bullet-resistant material in 6 shots (AmmoForSale.com, 2013; UL 752), and some of the best see-through bullet-resistant doors are Level 3, at the highest (Pacific Bulletproof Co., 2013). To slow him down properly, the door would have had to be Level 8 or higher (UL 752).

What the metal detectors do accomplish is to help expose anyone trying to conceal a gun coming into the school. Although it is possible visitors would be caught by this, this mainly targets students. That is, it targets detection of weapons being carried into the school by students. The students themselves show little evidence of being deterred from violence by the presence of metal detectors (Hankin, Hertz, & Simon, 2011, p.100).

What occurred next, after the shooter shot through the door and entered, was that three faculty members moved toward the noise to investigate (CNN, 2013). It is possible they were not sure what the noise was, exactly. In the article, it is described as “loud pops” (CNN, 2013). Certainly, one does not expect to hear gunshots and breaking glass at the beginning of a school-day. There is not a particular response that can even be suggested to address this. One cannot expect faculty to arm themselves before checking out a noise. The only potential suggestion one might make is for the sound of various types of gunfire to be included in training, as it tends to be misrepresented in Hollywood productions, so that faculty will be able to identify the noise and respond in a way that does not put them immediately and directly in jeopardy.

Teachers, hearing and recognizing the gunfire as such, now, moved students into the bathrooms and closets to hide them (CNN, 2013). Although this is not in the article, part of the reason the response to Sandy Hook has been to have students throw things at the invader and not just hide, is that when a teacher was shot in at least one of the classrooms,

the students panicked and flooded out of their hiding places. (CT) Some of my peers expressed that such was a stupid move, but, for one, when someone is actually in a situation it can be difficult to think clearly and, for another, one has to remember that he headed directly for the early grades (CNN, 2013). Kindergarteners and first-graders (CNN, 2013) cannot be expected to make adult decisions in emergency situations.

Much like airplane hijacking used to be dealt with by passive cooperation previous to 9/11, the strategy of depending solely on hiding is passing away with Sandy Hook, in favor of more active methods, mainly involving pelting invaders with anything and everything at hand, and evacuating, if possible. Both methods makes sense, as the assailant would be too busy defending himself to shoot, and evacuating the school would prevent students from being ‘sitting ducks’. Both are also just a small part of the main spearhead of more active defense: ALICE training. That is not to say that all the training is created equally or is the same across the board, but it at least formulates a school-wide response that includes actively combating or avoiding the shooter, rather than grouping up in a corner to be shot.

In the interim between teacher response to initial gunshots, and the arrival of the police, the majority of the shooting took place. However, this interim will be discussed later when more specifically addressing arming teachers. Here, instead, we shall skip down to how long it took before first responders arrived: 20 minutes (CNN, 2013). Though there will be more elaboration on this point later, regarding the function of first responders, for now suffice it to say that one good suggestion has been made regarding contacting police promptly. That is, it has been suggested that teachers and faculty have a button at their desks and in the teachers’ lounge that directly calls out the police, much like tellers use for bank robberies. This would ensure the police are contacted as promptly as possible, so that they can respond as promptly as possible. Of course, the button should probably be under the desk, or in a drawer or cabinet at the desk, to help avoid students causing false alarms. Now, this would not have helped the 20-minute gap, as this gap began with the first calls to the police (CNN, 2013), so it is purely response-time. However, especially in such cases where a long gap exists, the sooner the police can be reached, the better.

The downside to this alarm system, though, is that it depends on teachers and faculty

being there to press it. Unlike tellers, who are protecting cash and only have to stand behind a counter, teachers are on the move, and have their students to protect and move to safety. Obviously, they do not have to press their own button, and it would be a benefit for all the faculty and teachers to know exactly where all the buttons are, but, it is not necessarily possible for a teacher to just run over to the nearest button to press it. Yet, even with this taken consideration, often someone is available to press it. Even with suppressors (the true purpose of which is not to disguise the sound but confuse the location of the shooter in a crowd outdoors), at least one teacher should be able to hear and identify the sound of gunshots, go to the nearest button, and use it to alert police.

The remainder of what occurred is after-the fact. The shooter shot himself before he could be captured, the police gathered survivors to a local firehouse, getting them out of and away from the school, and the parents came out to the firehouse (CNN, 2013). From beginning to end, 28 people were murdered: 20 children ages 6-7, 6 adults at the school, the shooter's mother, whom he murdered right before attacking the school, and, lastly, the shooter himself, when he took his own life (CNN, 2013).

Going over it step-by-step, we have addressed: metal detectors, visual identification for entry, both regarding the point of entrance; identification/recognition of gunfire as noteworthy for inclusion within training, for aiding a safe response to gunfire; the switch-over from passive to active defense, as passive did not prove effective within the real-world scenario; and an alarm system for contacting the police promptly.

Now that we have gone over responses relevant, effective or otherwise, to Sandy Hook, let us now go over the overall response. Of note, there is one particular method that I will choose specifically to not take seriously, due to, frankly, how ridiculous it is, and that is bulletproof backpacks. It strikes about as feasible as combat helmets in the grocery store, if not less so. Aside from the expense, it would add weight to current concerns about already too-heavy backpacks, and be essentially useless, as backpacks spend most of their time in the lockers, and not on the children, except possibly for on the bus. Other than that, though, here we will go over the remaining methods and plans put out there in response to school shootings, and the implications or interconnecting issues involved with that overall response.

The three remaining methods having to do with the overall response are: Obama's Plan, security guards, and arming teachers and janitors. Since it has the most to do with an overall response, due to being a politically-sponsored national plan, we will first address Obama's Plan.

One of the first claims it makes is that each district can choose according to its customary needs (Strauss, 2013). The reason for my use of the word "claim" is that it does not follow up with specific points how it will ensure this customization ability, and later on refers to the Department of Education filtering through suggestions and implementing the ones it chooses (Strauss, 2013). It will do this not only for security, but also for discipline systems, in order to improve the internal environment of the school as a preventative measure (Strauss, 2013). There will also be additional required programs, such as for training teachers to detect mental illness in students and refer them to treatment (Strauss, 2013).

Another reason for my use of the word "claim" is because, with government funding and programs, comes the bureaucracy, regulations, and restrictions that choke the life out of local customization rendering it, if not impossible, not feasible due to being too busy fulfilling federal demands. Essentially, when the federal government takes over something there is very little room for local creativity. This plan, too, is full of funding and programs. Its answer to school shootings seems to be to throw money at the problem.

The plan calls for: up to 1,000 school resource officers and counselors, training for more than 5,000 mental health professionals, favored selection of grants for any local law enforcement that hires school resource officers, funding for safety equipment, millions of dollars towards training teachers to spot mental illness, millions towards helping the school get the students treatment, millions again for grants and funding for improving the internal climate of schools, and the resources it takes to develop a massive PR drive that attacks the stigmas associated with mental illness (Strauss, 2013). That is not to say that none of these are good ideas; more school counselors and a PR drive to battle stigmas sounds excellent, in fact.

The problem is it puts an even greater burden of responsibility on the schools. In return for receiving this funding, schools are held responsible to develop emergency plans to

whatever standard the government chooses to set, and to give an accounting that demonstrates the money is going to good use (Strauss, 2013). That part does not seem horrible, but there is more. The schools will be held responsible to implement strategies the government believes will improve the behavior of students (Strauss, 2013). This point in the plan makes the claim of custom plans for the school, by the school, a moot point, even if they try to implement it. If the government can tell them what their discipline plan will be, based on what the Department of Education deems to be a good idea, much less what security is needed, that is not providing an ability for the schools to fulfill their own needs according to their own plan.

In short, the response of the government via Obama's Plan, to the school shootings, is to throw resources at the schools and excise even more control over them. However, not all their ideas are bad. They specifically target mental illness and trauma, for example, which is a rising issue in this country, and one connected the original incident due to the shooter's trauma from being previously bullied at Sandy Hook (Stanglin, 2013).

Now, finally, we are to the main point. We have gone over various methods, some ineffective, and some potentially capable of slowing down and putting a shooter on the defense. The methods we now reach are those which have the potential to take a shooter down. Part of the controversy over armed resistance within the school is the belief that this is the police's job, and that we can trust someone sent through an academy and put on the streets to daily face armed assailants more than teachers or janitors, or even security guards, who would only be going through training at their individual schools to fight off an invader. Whether a policeman or an employee of the school, either one would have to take psychological exams to ensure they could be trusted with a weapon, both would receive appropriate training, but one, minutes away, is trusted more than the one already there.

First responders, though, are just that: responders. They show up to cut short problems, and clean up afterwards. They cannot be there to guard and protect the students. First responders minimize casualties, not prevent them. The possibility of security guards, or armed janitors, too, is one of interest. Their presence at the school helps, but it is essentially the same as the police, just a shorter commute, upstairs, downstairs, or whatever. They are

not necessarily there when the first shots are fired, and are not in control of who is firing those shots.

The ones who are, are the teachers. Of course, no method suggested is without its share of responsibility. The responsibility, though, does not fall on the school as an entity itself, though it should when it can, but on those who are there. It is the responsibility of each adult in that building, that if they run into a shooter in the building, they do what they can to stop him or her from wounding, and possibly killing, the children in that school. Shooters, though, have not been heading for the offices, but the classrooms. Teachers need to be ready.

Now, it is dangerous to hand a gun to a teacher who is uncomfortable with it (someone who is nervous with a weapon often grows clumsy with it), and there is no request to give a teacher a gun without knowing if they are mentally stable, first. The gun also should be stowed properly, in a locked safe, in a locked drawer. Yes, that does take time to unlock both, but it still takes less time than a security guard coming from the other side of the school building (security guards are expensive, so there is some doubt as to most schools having more than one, something not even funded by Obama's Plan,) or a police officer driving there from the department. Also, the deterrent to a shooter of simply knowing that if he walks into that school building with a gun, and shoots or threatens to shoot someone, that bullets may come flying his direction from any number of armed teachers, and their combined firepower, is a powerful deterrent indeed.

One point that was skipped earlier was the part during which the shooter slayed twenty children, and four more adults, in addition to the two women he killed when he first came in (CNN, 2013). During that time police were driving there, teachers were hiding the children, and he was going through the kindergarten and first-grade classrooms (CNN, 2013). Regardless of whatever methods could have been employed to slow him down, at this point, he was there, shooting, and there was no one able to shoot back.

Metal detectors and visual identification could not have slowed him down. Recognition of gunfire and pressing an alarm button theoretically could have alerted police sooner, but could not have shortened that twenty minutes. The switch-over from passive to

active defense might have cut short his attack, if they could have kept him down and restrained, or avoided him, but again, it is uncertain. Additional counselors and school resource officers might have been able to help him when he was bullied, and potentially prevented this shooting, but we cannot know that. He was quiet, autistic, and sensitive to touch (Stanglin, 2013). It cannot be said with certainty a counselor would have changed the outcome, or that an additional school resource officer would have stopped the bullying. There is also considerable doubt, whatever the government's plans might change in the internal environment of schools, that they will eliminate bullying, especially since laws have shown little effectiveness in this regard, thus far (Kueny & Zirkel, 2012) and more research is needed to decrease it, much less eliminate it (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011).

No other method provides the absolute, direct response, and effective end to the threat in a school shooting the way arming a trained teacher does. It only makes sense to fight firearm with firearm, and to arm the hands of the one who is often both the target, and in a protective role over targeted students. Waiting on police or depending on other methods alone, is unreliable.



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